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The Rhyme of the Friar Stephen

by
Eleanor C. Donnelly

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THE RHYME

OF THE

Friar Stephen

A LEGEND

BY

ELEANOR C. DONNELLY



2000
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TO

MY LIFE-LONG AND EVER-FAITHFUL
FRIEND,

Very Rev. Francis M. Sheeran, S. C. L., O. S. A.

PRIOR OF THE AUGUSTINIAN MONASTERY
OF ST. THOMAS OF VILLANOVA,
DELAWARE CO., PA.,

THIS BOOKLET IS INSCRIBED.

THE
Rhyme of the Friar Stephen.

A LEGEND.

FMONG the annals of the Persian Tartars,
The old Franciscan chronicles that show
The sacred Acts of those monastic martyrs
Who fell in Asia centuries ago :

*

We come upon a strange and thrilling story,
Like some rare, gorgeous blossom, ripen'd fast,
Arising in its oriental glory,
From the débris and death-dust of the Past.

The legend of the blessed martyr Stephen
Is full of solemn truth to all who read ;—
Attend, ye self-reliant ones ! for even
The best and wisest may its warning heed.

I.

AN orphan Magyar, fair and brave and gifted,
Led by the Spirit to the wilderness,
In the first blush of life,—his heart uplifted
Above the snares of earth's false happiness,—



The little Stephen, in his childhood, found him
Before the gates of one of those old haunts
Of Friars Minor in the desert. Round him
He saw, aglow with heaven's pure romance,



The simple cloisters, coolly dim and quiet,
Wherein were met the gentle brotherhood ;
A limpid fountain in their midst, and nigh it,
The little chapel with its cross of wood.





About its doors, some milk-white doves were
feeding :
The boy approached, and viewed them,
tender-eyed,
Then, knelt before the monks, enraptur'd,
pleading :
"Oh ! take me in, and let me here abide ! "

II.

Poor little pilgrim ! fleeing want and
danger,
Heir of the Christ-Child's innocence and
grace !
In that fair morning-hour, the helpless
stranger
Among the good Franciscans found his
place.



And there abode ; a pupil first, but later,
A novice, in his flowering youth profess'd ;
Devoted heart and soul to his Creator,
His ardent fervor distanced all the rest.

For, in his bosom burned those mighty fires
That only glow in apostolic men ;
“Now, God be with our Stephen !” said the
friars :
“ His zeal shall bid Saint Francis live again !”



Alas ! beneath the pure and thornless flowers
Of the first Paradise, the Serpent crawl'd ;
And the young Adam, peerless in his powers,
Bemoaned his fate, in Satan's snares enthralld.



And, since that dark, primeval day of sorrow,
No flesh can glory in its strength untried ;
The weakness of the creature can but borrow
The grace and courage by its Lord supplied !

III.

A NOBLE visage, a persuasive bearing ;
A form as fair as that of fabled prince ;
A self-devotion that was almost daring,
A golden tongue to argue and convince ;

A mind enriched with study and reflection,
The fiery passions held in stern control,
And over all, supreme in chaste election,
The glad vocation of the virgin soul,—



Thus, like another Baptist, Friar Stephen
Came from the desert in his manhood's dawn,
And, in submission to the will of Heaven,
Abode within the Convent of St. John.



The poor old Convent on the rich environs
Of Islam's stronghold, magical Seray,
That mighty city, where the fairest syrens
Of luxury and pleasure held their sway.



Oh ! what a field for an apostle's labors !
Oh ! what a soil to sow with heav'nly seed !
Only to save the souls of these dear neighbors,
Where is the monk that would not toil and
bleed ?

IV.

THE eyes of Stephen glow with holy fire,
His heart throbs quickly 'neath his russet
gown ;
He sees the sunlight on the lofty spire
Of mosque and mesjid ¹ in the Moslem
town.



And down he kneels among the monks, and
pressing
His brazen crucifix upon his heart :
"O Father ! give to me," he cries, "your
blessing,
And let me straightway to my work depart ! "



"Nay, nay, my son," the gray-hair'd Guardian
urges :
"Be not too rash or hasty in thy zeal ;
Thro' yonder town such foul corruption surges,
Its giant force might make an angel reel ;

“O'er young art thou, o'er passionate and eager—
Thou needest all the strength that God can
lend;

Refrain thyself in prayer, and in the rigor
Of holy penance, a brief season spend.”



“What sayest thou, good Guardian? Must I idle
These precious moments in a selfish prayer,
When, like the music calling to a bridal,
I hear the voice of souls that calls me *there*?



“That cries to me: ‘Bring hither thine evangel,
Oh! come to us and help us!’—Must I wait?”—
Alas! the while he pleaded like an angel,
Within his breast, self-trust was waxing great!

V.

WHO could resist his zeal? Who so censorious
As to mistrust the brave and gifted friar?
None could withstand that golden tongue.
Victorious,
It bent the wiser will to its desire.

And forth he went ; the convent cell was cheer-
less,
The monks were strange, the cloister stern
and gray ;
And down he went, all confident and fearless,
Into the fatal city of Seray.



Into a fiery furnace of destruction,
A very charnel of seductive sin,
Where gorgeous flowers, growth of rank cor-
ruption,
Entrancing, veiled the rottenness within.



It was the feast *Moharrum* ;² ne'er had mortals
Surpass'd the splendors of that city broad ;
Fair children flinging blooms at gilded portals,
Were chanting shyly : "Allah is our God !"



VI.

EXAMPLES and palaces allured the vision
From baths and booths on terraces of
green;
Delicious gardens stretched to groves
Elysian,
Bewildering as some enchanted scene.



In marble courts, unnumbered founts were
playing,
And blue-wing'd doves cooed in the mango
trees,
Near sweet acacias, tremulously swaying
Their silvern bells ⁴ with ev'ry passing breeze.



And, thro' the gilded screens of pleasure-bowers,
The dancing-girls were seen in dreamy grace,
Whirling and weaving chains of Kerzrah flowers
To deck their rosy robes of jewell'd lace.

It seemed a mirror of the Moslem heaven,
That strange, seductive city of Seray,
And never had the guileless eyes of Stephen
Gazed on delights so perilously gay.

VII.

REARED in the desert's virginal seclusion,
Screened from temptation's sight and
sound, and snare,
How could he meet this magical illusion
Save with the arms of Penance and of
Prayer?



Back on remembrance, rush'd the Guardian's
warning ;
Alas ! too late ; for in his ardent breast,
The fiercest passions rose in reckless scorning,
And writhed like cobras round a ring-dove's
nest.



Thoughts and temptations ne'er before imagined,
Swept in a torrent thro' his burning brain ;
Before him, passed the oriental pageant—
Bewitching music wooed him with its strain.

And looking, he forgot his lofty mission ;
And listening, remembered not the cries
Of souls that called him, in his morning's vision,
To bring to them the Gospel of the Skies !

VIII.

AS one who walks in an enchanted slumber,
Loses the past in blank oblivion,
Threading that radiant throng—too vast to
number—
The monk forgot the Convent of St. John.



But, sudden, thro' the tapestry of flowers
That curtained in the song and laughter sweet,
A bell rang sharply from the convent towers,
And on his startled ears, reproachful, beat !



O sad awaking of the erring spirit !
O wretched fate of the presumptuous soul !
A stainless life, with all its grace and merit,
Debauch'd, debased beneath the Fiend's con-
trol !

With bended head, with footsteps slow, uneven,
His heart's strange anguish pictured on his
face—

Back to his convent, turned the hapless Stephen,
And 'mid the waiting brethren took his place.

IX.

ACHANGE was over all—the simple choir
Looked bare and homely to his altered
eyes ;
The chant, the Beads, the lecture seemed to
tire
After that glimpse of Moslem Paradise.



No more before the shrine, in chaste emotion,
He led the Sacred Office brave and fair ;
Nor in his stall, with tenderest devotion,
Poured out his soul in faith-illumined prayer.



Mechanical, he went and came : a phantom
That wore the young apostle's face and form ;
That in his duties spake and wrought at
random—
A thing of ice, no flame of love could warm.

But in the nights, when all his mates were
sleeping,

And that unnatural calm was swept away,
Pacing his cell with groans and bitter weeping,
He wandered back in fancy to Seray.



There, were the moonlight's mellow glories
glowing

On snowy minarets and shining domes ;
There, were the dark-eyed children, roses
strewing
Thro' brilliant streets, around their beauteous
homes.



Once more, he heard theplash of perfum'd
waters

In dreamy groves, with bird and blossom
bright ;

Once more, he looked on Islam's lovely
daughters,

The airy dancers of a day's delight !

About him, breathed the wild, bewitching
sweetness

Of Eastern music. Mosque and mesjid fair—
The Moslem town in all its grand completeness
Of palaces and people, glittered there !

X.

WHAT could he do, but flee in fear and
trembling
To cast him at his ghostly Father's feet --
And, laying bare his soul, without dis-
sembling,
The shameful trial, shuddering, repeat ?



Unceasing raged the combat, strange and tragic,
'Twixt light and darkness, Paradise and Hell :
The grace of Jesus, Lucifer's vile magic
Besieging in their turns, the citadel



Of that poor heart . . . 'Twas Lent. The
monks in choir,
Besought the Lord with discipline and prayer
To look in mercy on the tempted Friar,
And save him from the madness of despair.

WOE, woe to him who, in his own poor
 powers,
 Hath put his trust in battle with the
 Fiend !
 From first to last, that broken staff of
 ours
 Hath ever pierced the hand that on it
 leaned !



The anxious days, momentous, dawned and
 darkened ;
 The Demon raged : the Angel hid his face ;
 Before the crucifix, no longer hearkened
 The hapless Stephen to the voice of grace.



For, in the hour when all the holy friars
 Were gathered at the Maundy Thursday Rite,
 The young monk, mastered by his mad desires,
 Fled from the sacred cloister : took his flight,

Like a base traitor, to the Moslem city,
Infested with its unbelieving horde,—
The very day (O angels! weep in pity!)
Whereon a JUDAS once betrayed his Lord!

XII.

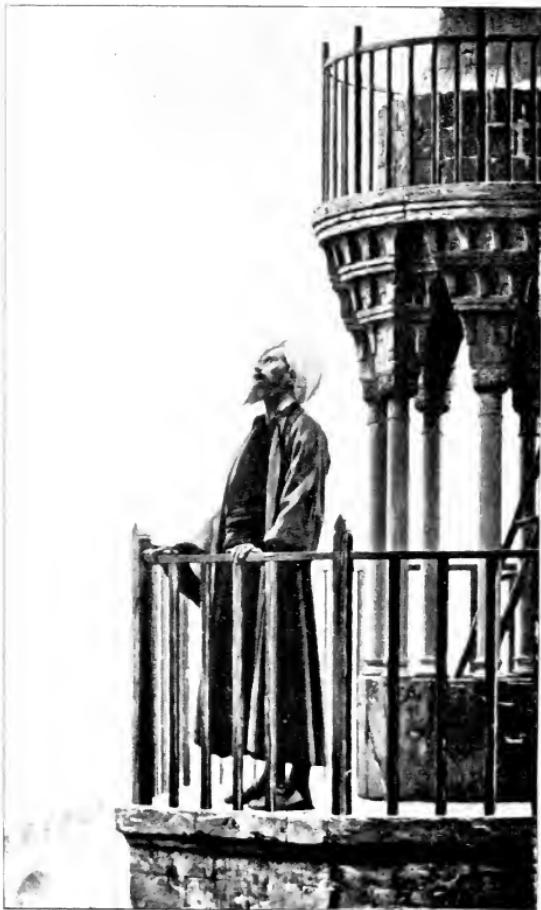
BEFORE the crowded gates of Kadi Hafet,
The Magyar hastens to cry, without demur:
"Great is the God of Mahomet the Prophet!
Behold in me, his humble worshipper!"



"All praise to Allah!" shout the Muftis⁶
madly;
And, straightway, by the Moslem mob beset,
They hurry him to where the Kadi⁷ gladly
Awaits him in his secret cabinet.



Thence, do they speed him forth, in open litter,
Unto the grand Ulema,⁷ veiled and wierd,
Where an ag'd Imaum with deep eyes a-glitter,
Leans from his rich musnud⁸ to pluck his
beard,



And scream : " What wouldst thou, dog ? Hot
blood runs coldly
In quest of truth ? Hast thou Alkoran "
read ? "
To all of which the pervert answers boldly,
Nor halts at blasphemies his purpose dread.



With eyes like blazing lamps, at each assertion,
The yellow mummy clasps his withered hands.
O what a gain to Iran ¹⁰ this perversion !
What foul disgrace the cross of Issa ¹¹ brands !



Hark ! the muezzin's ¹² call the conclave closes !
The Imaums ¹³ speak the traitor-monk : " 'Tis
done.
Thou now art *Istephan* ; the Mosque of Roses,
To-morrow, shall behold thee Islami's ¹⁴ son ! "

XIII.

ON the morrow, true to that sad saying,
The Mosque of Roses saw a wondrous
sight ;
A mighty crowd within its walls was
swaying,
And all its perfum'd air was full of light.



For high above them all, his monk's attire
The cynosure of ev'ry eager eye,
Beside the Kadi, stood the perjured Friar,
To speak aloud his sacrilegious lie.



Alas ! alas ! on that tremendous morrow,
The Christians in their churches, crush'd with
woe,
On that GOOD FRIDAY, fast of mortal sorrow,
The Passion of our Lord were chanting slow.

- The while the priest his tears the page obscuring,
Pronounced the hallowed words in chancel
dim,
- Within the Mosque, a Christian was abjuring
The Blessed Christ who bled and died for him!

XIV.

HEV tore the sacred habit from his
shoulders,
And cast it at the Kadi's feet disgraced ;
A gorgeous caftan¹⁵ was around him folded,
And on his head, a jewelled turban
placed.



Upon his feet, they fastened silvern sandals,
A chain of pearls upon his bosom bold,
And, over all, they cast a royal mantle,
Magnificent with 'broideries of gold.



Stirred was the city. Called the rapturous
criers :
“ Rejoice, ye sons and daughters of Seray !
The mighty Imaum of the Christian friars
Hath trampled upon Issa's cross to-day ! ”

Then, went there forth a marvellous procession
Of all the grace and glory of the town,
Bearing in state, beneath the shining crescent,
The young apostate with his jewelled crown.



While, far above each flag and floating banner,
(The target of derision and dislike.)
The holy habit of the Friars Minor
Was lifted on a mocking soldier's pike.

XV.

Ⓐ H ! then the hearts of the unhappy
Christians
Were broken by that last most bitter blow:
And on the roads, the scandalized Fran-
ciscans
Their faces hid with sobs and groans of
woe.



Sweet Lord ! thro' all the impious ovation,
Thro' all the blare of trumpet, roll of drum,
Those sobs, those groans of tender lamentation
Unto the ear of guilty Stephen come !

He sees the blush upon the dear old faces,
He hears them mourning for his awful sin :
A strange compunction —last of all his graces—
Incipient, stirs his sobered heart within.

XVI.

WHAT means (is asked) that shade of
deadly sadness
That settles round the new-made Mus-
sulman ?
Why hath the glow of proud, triumphant
gladness
Fled from the lofty brow of Istephan ?



They bring him to the banquet-hall of princes,
Rare wines and richest viands crown the
board ;
He spurns each luscious dish, and shuddering,
wincest
Whene'er the Kishmee's ^{1st} fiery draught is
pour'd.

What time resplendent hours¹⁷ throng the dwelling,
And chant their ziraleets.¹⁸ With smothered cries,
He hides his face—his soul, abhorrent, swelling,
And tears in torrents gushing from his eyes.

XVII.

THE slaves have gone. The dancing-girls, dejected,
Withdraw, in turn, unnoticed as the rest ;
And, last of all, their dark designs effected,
The Imaums, too, retire from their guest.

87

Effulgent gleam, 'mid orient rugs and couches,
Mirrors and perfum'd lamps ; each polish'd wall
Bright flow'rs and founts reflects : but Stephen
crouches
In solitary grandeur, blind to all.

Till, snatching from the folds of his attire,
His waxen tablets—lo ! he writes thereon :
*“The sinner Stephen, the apostate friar,
Sends greeting to his brethren of Saint John.*



*“Like Judas, I have sinned ; but not like Judas,
Do I despair of mercy or of heaven ;
For, by the help of Him who hath renewed us,
I shall repair the scandal I have given !*



*“I pray ye, therefore, brothers, do not harden
Your hearts against me : nor my plea deny,
But send to me a priest with hope of pardon,
That I may make my peace before I die !”*

XVIII.

¶ AR in the night, a Persian mercenary
Stole with the tablets to the cloister stairs,
When the Grand Silence ¹⁹ of the monastery
Was broken by ecstatic hymns and prayers.

The lost was found, the dead to life had risen :
A glory hovered o'er the Moslem town ;
Beyond the shame, the torture, and the prison,
They caught the splendor of the Martyr's
crown !



Long ere the *ezam*²⁰ of the dawn had sounded,
The valiant Guardian, in a slave's disguise,
Past the apostate's gilded doors had bounded,
And clasped his erring son, with streaming
eyes.



A secret closet offers safe recesses,
And there, the while the Paschal tapers shine,
The prodigal, at last, his crimes confesses,
And feeds once more upon the Lamb Divine.

XIX.

HE glad aurora of the Easter morning
Showered its dewdrops upon old Seray,
Till, crown'd with diamonds, like a bride's
adorning,
The Mosque of Roses in the sunlight lay.

From far and near, in jubilant elation,
The Persians flock'd. 'Twas rumored long
and loud,
That Istephan, the glory of their nation,
Would greet once more the mighty Moslem
crowd.



He came ; all Islam thronged the vast enclosure,
When at the noontide, thro' that sea of men,
The Friar made his way with strange composure,
And mounted to the Tribune once again.



Oh ! how they cheered him as he tower'd above
them,
Clad in his scarlet mantle rich with gold ;
What frenzy of the passions seemed to move
them,
As thro' the Mosque, their shouts of triumph
rolled !

But lo ! a hush—a stillness as from heaven
Falls on the storm ; and then, 'tis Stephen
cries :

“All glory to the Cross of Christ be given,
And may Alkoran perish with its lies !



“I believe in Thee, Christ Jesus, Lord and
Master !
Great Son of God ! True Saviour of the world !
On the false Prophet, on the foul impostor,
Anathema ! anathema, be hurl'd ! ”



And, straightway, tearing off his scarlet vesture,
He cast it from him in their startled sight ;
And stood before them, with triumphant gesture,
Clad in the habit of the Minorite !



XX.

WITH glowing face, with arms outstretch'd
to heaven,
A victim eager to be sacrific'd :
"God for my witness!" cried the radiant
Stephen :
"I am a Christian, and would die for
Christ!"



And then—O saints and angels, what a vision!—
Like cruel tigers thirsting for his blood,
With shouts of fury and of wild derision,
The Imaums fell upon him where he stood.



They tore him from the Tribune—scourged and
smote him,
Bound him with chains, a slave for Christ's
sweet sake ;
Unto the fatal pyre, bleeding, brought him,
And lit the flames that wreath'd the hideous
stake.

XXI.

IX times the day dawned on those torments
dire,

Six times the night shrouded that life in
death ;

By God sustained, despite of scourge and
fire,

The hero lived—and witness'd to his
faith !



But, in the seventh noon of his endurance,
Upon th' intrepid Friar rush'd his foes :
Faith had its crown, and Love, its sweet assur-
ance—

The young life fled at last 'neath deadly blows!



Heaven be praised ! the while his corse lay
prostrate,
Shrivelled and crush'd amid the embers faint,
The snow-white soul of Stephen the Apostle
Soared to the skies—a new Franciscan saint !

His grievous sin sublimely expiated,
The robes of shame forever cast aside ;
In Christ's dear grace and favor reinstated,
The Martyr reigned—and God was glorified !



ADDENDA.

Note.—The main facts of this narrative poem are authenticated by Wadding, Féret, and M. l'Abbé Huc.

- ¹ “Mesjid”—An inferior mosque.
- ² “Moharrum”—The death-day of the two sons of Mahomet.
- ³ “Blue-wing'd doves”—The favorite birds of the Prophet
- ⁴ “Silvern bells”—It is the custom of the Mahometans to hang bells on trees on their feast-days.
- ⁵ “Muftis”—The doctors of the Mahometan law.
- ⁶ “Kadi”—A magistrate or judge.
- ⁷ “Ulema”—The sacred college of the Turks.
- ⁸ “Musnud”—A couch.
- ⁹ “Alkoran”—The Mahometan Bible.

- ¹⁰ "Iran"—The ancient name of Persia.
- ¹¹ "Issa"—Jesus.
- ¹² "Muezzin"—The officer who announces the hour of prayer.
- ¹³ "Imaums"—The successors of Mahomet—the teachers of his creed.
- ¹⁴ "Islam"—The religion of Mahomet—the great body of his followers.
- ¹⁵ "Caftan"—An oriental robe.
- ¹⁶ "Kishmee"—An eastern wine.
- ¹⁷ "Houris"—Beautiful young girls.
- ¹⁸ "Ziraleets"—Songs of joy sung by Mahometan women.
- ¹⁹ "Grand Silence"—A time of silence observed in some monasteries from 10 P. M. until matins, and not to be broken except by grave necessity.
- ²⁰ "Ezam"—The call to Mahometan prayers, sounded at five different hours, by the muezzin.





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